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Highlands waste pits target of Superfund clea

By Barrett Goldsmith

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Harris County Judge Ed Emmett toured the site of a proposed federal Superfund cleanup Wednesday, calling on the public to provide input on the area that has been pumping dangerous levels of dioxin into the San Jacinto River.

The site, off the Interstate 10 bridge near FM 2100 in Highlands, was first discovered by the Texas Parks and Wildlife department in 2005 and reported to the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality. TCEQ began investigating the site and determined that a now defunct paper mill owned by McGinnis Industrial Maintenance Corp., which is no longer in existence, was the primary cause of the pollution.

U.S. Rep. Gene Green and U.S. Rep. Ted Poe have been lobbying to get the site placed on the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's National Priority List, which would allow the EPA to leverage its resources to investigate the scope of the damage, and potentially clean up the site. The EPA is now soliciting public input on the site to determine if local folks wish to place the site on the Superfund list, and Emmett said he is especially keen to hear from those who may have knowledge about the site, the company or the operations at the plant.

"We're at the stage where we really need public comment," Emmett said. "If anyone has any information or photographs of the area, we'd like them to share it with us. We don't have any contacts from the company, but my office will work to find out who is responsible. We need to figure out when it went out of business and who worked there."

Emmett also warned people not to fish in the area around the site, including large chunks of the San Jacinto River. Signs have been placed around potential fishing areas warning people against fishing in the river, but many people continue to ignore the signs, and Emmett said some signs have been torn down. The dioxins suspected of polluting the river are known to cause cancer, birth defects and damage to the immune system.

"The water is not safe," Emmett said. "This is very serious."

The site is about two-thirds underwater, with only a small slip of land visible

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to passersby, but Emmett said the dangers are easy to see.

Stephen Tzhone, an environmental scientist with the EPA, said the site could be placed on the NPL by the spring or as late as fall, depending on public input. If indeed the site is placed on the list, the process of preparing for a cleanup would be a lengthy one. It would involve a remedial investigation to determine the nature and scope of the damage, a feasibility study, selection of possible remedies, public hearings and the actual cleanup.

☐ Depending on what we find, it could take many years, ☐ Tzhone said.
☐ Some remedies take as long as 30 years, though some may be as short as five or 10 years. It simply depends on what we find. ☐

The last major hurdle for the site's inclusion on the list was cleared when Gov. Rick Perry sent a letter to the EPA on July 26, voicing the state's support for the decision, which is required by federal guidelines.

The EPA has about 1,150 sites on the NPL, including about 75 in Texas and between 15-20 in Harris County. Don Walters, a community involvement specialist with the EPA, said the process of investigating and cleaning up sites can run between \$7-10 million, though he said it varies greatly and could cost much more.

The public comment portion of the process ends Nov. 18. Comments can be submitted by e-mail to superfund.docket@epa.gov, or sent to Docket Coordinator, Headquarters, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, CERCLA Docket Office, mail code 5305T, 1200 Pennsylvania Ave., Washington D.C., 20460. For more information on the Superfund program, call 800-424-9346 or visit www.epa.gov, which includes a map of the site and the areas affected by the dioxins.

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